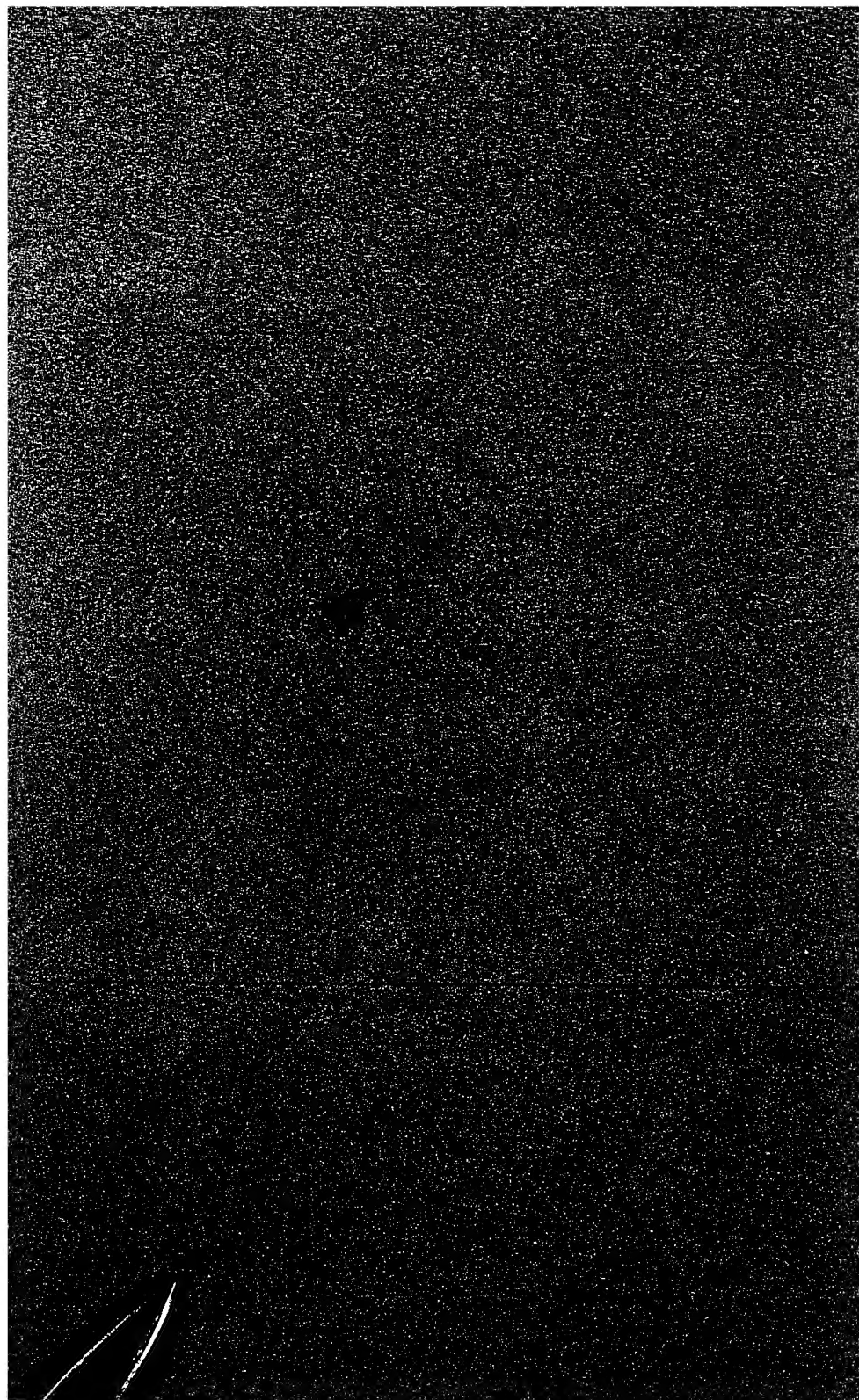


THE HISTORICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY  
OF MANITOBA

ON EARLY ICELANDIC SETTLEMENTS  
IN CANADA

BY SAMUEL G. DRAYTON



**The Historical and Scientific Society  
of Manitoba**

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**The Early Icelandic Settlements  
In Canada**

BY

**MR. SIGTR. JONASSON**

EDITOR OF "THE LOGBERG"

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## The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada

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At a meeting of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society held in the City Hall, Winnipeg, on Friday, 22nd March, 1901, the President, Mr. J. R. Grant in the chair, Mr. Sigtr. Jonasson, editor of *The Logberg*, read the following paper :

Though only a little more than a quarter of a century has passed by since the Icelanders began to settle in Canada, yet it is somewhat difficult to gather up certain facts which appear to me absolutely necessary to embody in a paper of this kind, in order to make it of some real historical value.

Before taking up the main subject of this paper—The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada—I think it is proper to touch on certain events which led up to the founding of these settlements. And in this connection it is necessary to explain that one of the difficulties in framing this paper is the fact that the writer had a considerable share in matters connected with the first Icelandic settlements in Canada.

It naturally suggested itself to the writer that he should leave himself entirely in the background, but he, himself, being one of the actors in the drama, it seemed impracticable to ignore the fact altogether.

The information that the writer had some share in the matters he has undertaken to record may also be of some importance, inasmuch as it makes clear that he is not altogether depending on material furnished by others—is not merely dealing at second hand in this matter—but has personal knowledge of most of the facts recorded.

With reference to the events, then, which led up to the establishing of Icelandic settlements in Canada, I think it is not out of place to mention, that as far as known, no emigration had taken place from the Island of Iceland from the time

the Norsemen first began to settle there, in the year 874, until in the sixth decade of the nineteenth century, when two or three small parties emigrated to South America (Brazils). In saying this I, of course leave out the emigration to Greenland towards the close of the tenth century—whence it is claimed that the Icelandic colonists made several expeditions to the east coast of Canada in the beginning of the eleventh century. I am, of course, only referring to modern times.

Thus it will be seen that the great emigration-wave of Europe did not strike the historical island, bordering on the Arctic circle, until after the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the spring of 1870 four young men left Iceland for North America, landing in Quebec on the 19th day of June. They, however, went through to the United States, to Wisconsin, and settled there. They are considered the first real Icelandic immigrants to North America, although it is known that a few persons from the Westman Islands (a short distance off the south coast of Iceland) had been proselyted by Mormon missionaries and gone to Utah some years earlier.

The next year (1871) a small party left Iceland and went through to Wisconsin, and in 1872 another small party (a little over a dozen persons) also went to Wisconsin. These few who had so far emigrated were, however, both from the southern and northern districts of Iceland, and some of them wrote letters to their friends at home, describing this rediscovered country in rather glowing terms, so that the news spread among the people on both sides of the island at the same time. Some of these letters were published in a fortnightly newspaper, issued in the chief town in the north of Iceland, during the winter of 1872-3, and then people in that part of the island began to talk in earnest about emigrating on a considerable scale, and to gather up whatever information they could about the different parts of the North American continent.

The writer, then a young man of twenty, followed this movement with great interest from the very first, and in the summer of 1872 started on a voyage of discovery all by himself, landing in Quebec in September, 1872.

When the writer left home, he had not made up his mind

in what part of this vast continent he would try his luck, only that he would go to Quebec and see some of Canada to begin with. But on board the steamer which brought him across, he became acquainted with an elderly Scotchman from Ontario, who had gone home to Scotland on a visit and was returning to Canada. This gentleman gave the writer advice on two heads in particular : First, not to drink any of the St. Lawrence water without mixing a "wee drop" of whiskey with it, and second, to go to Ontario, assuring the writer that that province was the finest part not only of Canada, but of the whole North American continent !

Whether or not the writer followed the Scotch gentleman's advice regarding the first point, he did not feel any bad effects from the St. Lawrence water, but he followed his advise as to the second point and stopped in Ontario—in the southwestern part of the province—and did not regret it.

The writer (who is, as far as is known, the first Ice-lander that settled in Canada) wrote some letters to friends in the north of Iceland during his first winter in Ontario and gave his impressions of the province, which were favorable. Whether this had anything to do with directing attention to Ontario is not clear, but it is a fact that Ontario was discussed at a meeting held at the port of Akureyri, in July, 1872, by the first large party of emigrants which left Iceland. The intending emigrants discussed their destination at that meeting, some advocating settling as near the Atlantic coast as possible—in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick—others advocating Ontario, and some advocating the Western States, particularly Wisconsin, where some of their countrymen had already settled, as stated above.

The result of these deliberations was that it was decided that the whole party, numbering some 180 souls, should—with the exception of a few who had relations and friends in Wisconsin—go to Ontario in a body.

The bulk of the party—153 souls—sailed from Akureyri for Scotland, by a steamer engaged in the sheep and pony trade; on August 4th, arriving in Granton on the 10th. (The balance, 20-30 souls, came on later.) The party sailed from Glasgow August 12th, arriving at Quebec on 25th. Thence

the party proceeded to Toronto, where those who went to Wisconsin separated from it and went on west.

The idea of the party was to form an Icelandic settlement, and as there was a large area of "free grant" or homestead land available in the Muskoka district—some 150 miles north of Toronto—it was decided to locate there. Consequently the party left Toronto on Aug. 29th, arriving at Rousseau—a small village on Lake Rousseau, in the Muskoka district—on the evening of August 30th. Then men were sent to examine the country to the north, but they were not satisfied with the locality which they had been specially directed to.

In the meantime two men of the party examined the land up the Rousseau River, and liked that section much better. They bought two improved farms there, about six miles from Rousseau, and it was decided to form a settlement in that neighborhood. But as it was late in the season when a road had been cut to the locality, only those two who had bought farms moved on their land that fall. The majority of the party not possessing much money, and being disappointed in obtaining steady employment during the winter in the neighborhood, some began to scatter to different places to the south to obtain work, and did not come back to go on farms in the settlement selected, quite a few going to Wisconsin the next summer. The consequence was that only about a dozen families went on farms in this first Icelandic settlement in Canada the next spring, and it never came to much, although a few settlers were added in later years. More have all the time gone away, so at the present there remain only five Icelandic settlers in the colony, who, however, have done well on their Ontario bush farms.

Early in the spring of 1874 the writer paid a visit to his countrymen in the vicinity of Rousseau. He induced three of those in Rousseau to go with him to explore the country to the north more thoroughly than they had done. They went first to Parry Sound, then a small town on the Georgian Bay (about 25 miles west from Rousseau), and then they struck north beyond the settlements in the Parry Sound district. Then they went east some 30 miles, through an entirely un-



settled bush country into the Muskoka district, and north as far as the Magnetewan River.

The idea was to explore the country as far as Lake Nipissing, but warm weather coming on the travelling got so bad that they had to return to Rousseau. But they got a very clear idea of the character of this portion of Northern Ontario, and although they saw some fair land, they were not altogether satisfied with it as a future home for those of their nationality, who might emigrate to this country.

In the summer of the same year (1874) word came across to the effect that a large party of immigrants was expected from Iceland, in the course of the season, and that there was a likelihood that they would go to Nova Scotia. The Icelanders at Rousseau discussed the matter thoroughly, and from the knowledge they had gained about Canada at large, they came to the conclusion that they would rather advise this expected party to come to Ontario than ~~go to the Maritime~~ provinces.

The result of this was that the Agent of the Ontario Government at Rousseau induced the Government to send the writer to meet the steamer which was expected to carry the party across and land it at Halifax. Consequently the writer did go to Halifax and waited there some weeks, until he got word from Quebec that the steamer—the old St. Patrick, of the Allan Line—was bringing the party direct from Iceland to Quebec. The writer then went to Quebec and met the ship there, she arriving on the 23rd day of September with 365 Icelandic souls on board. A few of the immigrants were determined to go to Nova Scotia and were consequently sent there, but most of the party came on to Toronto.

Many of these immigrants were poor and required employment to support themselves and families. It was therefore decided to send the whole party—except some single men and women who could get employment elsewhere—to a village called Kinmount, some 50 miles back from the town of Lindsay, a new railway—the Victoria Railway—being under construction between these two points.

The writer went to Kinmount in advance with an Agent of the Ontario Government, to make certain arrangements for

the reception of the immigrants, and when the news spread that a large party of Icelanders was coming there to settle in the vicinity, the people of the quiet little village were considerably excited. Everybody was asking what kind of people these Icelanders were; whether they were peasants; how they looked, etc. One lady was particularly anxious to know of the Agent how the Icelanders looked, and asked him if they were not Eskimos. The writer was standing at the Agent's side at the time—a much younger and a good deal better looking man than now—when the Agent—who was possessed of some humor—pointed to the writer and said: "Behold a specimen of an Icelandic!" The lady changed the subject of the conversation.

The party was then moved to Minnagona and the men were employed on the railway during most of the winter. But owing to some financial difficulties work was suspended, which left the immigrants in a sad plight. There was enough "free grant" land in the vicinity of Minnagona for them being examined next spring, with a view of settling some of the party on farms, it was found to be no better than the land in the Muskoka and Parry Sound districts, so very few cared to take up land in the vicinity of Minnagona.

Several families and young people who had enough means, then left and went to Nova Scotia to join those who had already gone there and were being assisted by the Government of that province to start an Icelandic settlement on a tract of land in Halifax County, about 20 miles back from the seashore. Altogether some 20 persons went to Nova Scotia from Ontario, although told that they would not be satisfied there—would not be satisfied with lands that other emigrants had passed by—and that they had better follow the current of immigration westward—follow Horace Greeley's advice to go west.

Some more emigrants came from Iceland the next year and joined the Nova Scotia colony, so there were at one time about 200 souls in that settlement. But when the people in this settlement heard from those of their countrymen who had in the meantime gone to the Northwest they picked up stakes and came to the Red River valley—mostly during the year

1881—so there is not a single Icelandic settler left in that Nova Scotia colony.

As already stated the Icelanders at Kinnmount were in a sad plight and the idea was uppermost in the minds of most of the Icelanders in Ontario to move to the Western States as soon as they could. At that very time people in Ontario were becoming interested in Manitoba, and a movement was beginning within. A gentleman by the name of John Taylor, who lived not far from Kinnmount, then had a conference with the Icelanders in that locality and offered to go to Ottawa and try to interest the Dominion Government in helping the Icelanders to establish themselves in the Canadian Northwest, and this offer was thankfully accepted. Mr. Taylor then went to Ottawa and had an interview with some of the Dominion ministers in reference to the scheme of settling the Icelanders in the Northwest, but the ministers seen were rather dubious about these people as desirable settlers,—and reluctant to take up the matter.

Lord Dufferin was the Governor-General of Canada at that time and it so happened that he had, as a young man, come up to Iceland on a cruise into the Polar seas, and had seen the Icelanders at home. He has told of his impressions of Iceland, and her people in his famous book "Letters from High Latitudes."

Mr. Taylor then saw Lord Dufferin, and it is an open secret that he interested himself in the scheme of settling the Icelanders in the Northwest and interceded with his ministers. This is, amongst other things, proven by the words he used in one of his speeches when he visited the Northwest in the summer of 1877. He said to the Icelanders: "I have pledged my official honor to my Canadian brethren that you will succeed"—and the writer believes that the Icelanders have redeemed the pledge of their noble friend.

Pursuant to the arrangement made by Mr. Taylor at Ottawa, the Icelanders at Kinnmount held a meeting on May 30th, 1875, and chose delegates from amongst themselves, for the purpose of visiting the Canadian Northwest and reporting upon it as to its fitness as a future home for the Icelanders. The delegates selected were: Mr. Skafti Arason, now one

of the wealthiest farmers in the Municipality of Argyle ; Mr. Christian Johnson, implement dealer at Baldur ; Mr. Einar Jonasson, now residing in the village of Gimli ; and the writer.

The delegates started for the Northwest on July 2nd, accompanied by Mr. Taylor, going by way of Milwaukee. There they were joined by Mr. S. Christopherson—now a successful farmer residing at Grund, Manitoba—as a delegate on behalf of the Icelanders in Wisconsin, and then the party proceeded to Moorhead, Minnesota, that being the nearest railway point to what was generally known as Fort Garry. From Moorhead the delegates proceeded down the Red River by one of the old sternwheel steamers, landing at Fort Garry—Winnipeg—on the 16th day of July, 1875, which is the date on which the first Icelanders set foot on Canadian soil in the Great Northwest.

The delegates were at once favorably impressed with the Red River country, although it did not look very inviting in the neighborhood of Winnipeg at the time they arrived, the grasshoppers having eaten up almost every green thing.

After having seen the country round Winnipeg and made enquiries about the different sections within a radius of one hundred miles or so, the delegates decided to go to Lake Winnipeg and examine the west shore of that vast inland sea.

Their reasons for fixing on that part of the country were as follows :

1. They thought that the grasshoppers would not be as likely to do damage to crops in that region as on the prairie ;
2. there was abundant building timber and fuel in that section ;
3. there was a waterway from that section to Winnipeg ;
4. there was abundance of fine fish in the lake ;
5. a large tract of land could be obtained there as an Icelandic reserve without interfering with other settlers ;
6. the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was supposed to cross the Red River at the present site of the town of Selkirk, and would not be far from a settlement on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg.

The delegates proceeded to Lake Winnipeg in a York boat, supplied by the Hudson's Bay Company, and had for a guide the late Mr. Joseph Monkman from St. Peters. After

examining portions of the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, as far as time would allow, and finding that the soil was of good quality, they selected there a site for an Icelandic colony, commencing at the southern boundary of township 18 and running north along the shore a distance of 36 miles—together with Big Island—and christened the tract selected "New Iceland," the same being now included in the Municipality of Gimli.

After returning to Winnipeg, the delegates drew up a report of their observations and advised their countrymen in Ontario to come to the Northwest. Three of the delegates then went east—two remaining in Manitoba—and presented the report to the Icelanders at Kinmount, who, after due deliberations, decided to move to "New Iceland" in a body that same fall, although it was a risky thing on account of the lateness of the season.

Consequently a party of about 250 Icelanders from the vicinity of Kinmount left for the Canadian Northwest on the 21st day of September, this number being considerably increased on the way by additions from other parts of Ontario and from Wisconsin. The party went by rail to Sarnia and there took a steamer to Duluth. Thence the party went by rail to the Red River and came down that highway of those times on a steamer and barges. Quite a few of the party, mostly single people, remained in Winnipeg, but the bulk made as speedy preparations as possible to go to "New Iceland."

The party secured a number of so-called flatboats, on which they loaded themselves and their supplies, and started from Winnipeg, for Lake Winnipeg, on October 17th. The current carried the fleet down to the mouth of the Red River, which was a very slow sail, occupying four days. According to an arrangement made with the Hudson's Bay Company their steamer, the "Colville"—the only lake steamer at that time—took the fleet of flatboats in tow at the mouth of the Red River on the morning of the 21st of October, and pulled these frail craft without any serious accident to Willow Harbor—15 miles from the mouth of the river—and the fleet landed there, at the sand bar which protects the north side of

the harbor, close to the present site of the village of Gimli, on the afternoon of the same day, at 4.30 o'clock.

Although it froze up a few days after these plucky pioneers landed at Willow Bar, they managed to build themselves log shanties and pull through a long and extremely severe winter.

Thus was the first and largest Icelandic settlement in the Canadian Northwest founded—a settlement which, in spite of several misfortunes in its early days, now contains some 2,500 prosperous people.

SIGTR. JONASSON.

Dr. Bryce, in moving a vote of thanks, proposed that the paper be printed as one of the Society's transactions ; he also suggested an addition to the paper giving certain statistics as to the number and geographical localities of such settlements in Manitoba, until the fuller paper giving details of the settlements in Manitoba which had been promised by Capt. Jonassen was read.

Mr. W. J. McLean, seconded the resolution, and expressed himself warmly as to the worthiness of the Icelandic communities in one or two settlements which he had visited. Mr. McDonald followed in a humorous speech and thanked the author for his paper, which he had suggested to him some time ago.

Mr. Chas. Mair and Mr. T. H. Johnson also spoke briefly and in commendation of the paper and in high appreciation of the Icelanders as settlers. This closed the public meeting.

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## APPENDIX

To S. Jonasson's paper on the "Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," shewing the location, population, etc., of Icelandic settlements in Manitoba :

### I. THE GIMLI SETTLEMENT,

(New Iceland), began in the fall of 1875. It is situate on the west shore of the south end of Lake Winnipeg and comprises broken townships 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24, range 4 east of the first meridian, and parts of same townships in range 3 east ; also Big Island in Lake Winnipeg, comprising broken townships 24, 25 and 26, ranges 5 and 6 east. Present Icelandic population in the whole Gimli settlement is about 2,500 souls. It is the main portion of the organized Municipality of Gimli, has ten public schools, one of them—the school in the Village of Gimli—being a graded school.

### II. THE WINNIPEG COLONY.

The Icelanders began to establish themselves in the City of Winnipeg as early as in the autumn of 1875. The Icelandic population of Winnipeg numbers over 4,000 souls.

### III. THE SELKIRK COLONY.

The Icelanders began to establish themselves in the town of Selkirk as early as the year 1880. They now number about 700 souls, or one-third of the population of Selkirk.

### IV. THE ARGYLE SETTLEMENTS.

The Icelanders began to settle in the present Municipality of Argyle (in townships 5 and 6, ranges 13 and 14 west of the first meridian) in 1881. The Icelandic population in said townships, in the Village of Glenboro (situate in township 7, range 14 west) and northeast of Glenboro (in township 8, range 13 west) is considerably over 1,000 souls.

### V. THE POSEN SETTLEMENTS.

The Icelanders began to settle in the Municipality of Posen in 1885. They established themselves in townships 19 and 20, ranges 3 and 4 west of the first meridian (near the

east shore of Lake Manitoba) and have since spread into the adjoining townships, mostly east around the north end of Shoal Lake. The Icelandic population in these settlements is about 500 souls.

#### VI. THE NARROWS SETTLEMENT.

There is an Icelandic settlement east of the Narrows of Lake Manitoba, scattered along the lake shore from Dog Creek to Sifton's Landing (townships 22, 23, and 24, range 10 west). The Icelanders began to settle there in 1890, and the population is about 150 souls.

#### VII. THE BIG POINT SETTLEMENT.

In 1891 the Icelanders began to settle on the west shore of Lake Manitoba (in townships 16, and 17, range 9 west) in which locality the Icelandic population amounts to some 250 souls.

#### VIII. THE PIPESTONE SETTLEMENT.

There is a small Icelandic settlement near the western boundary of Manitoba (in townships 6 and 7, ranges 29 and 30 west). The first Icelandic settlers went in there in 1891, and the population numbers no more than 100 souls.

#### IX. THE MORDEN SETTLEMENT.

In 1899 some Icelandic settlers began to establish themselves south of the town of Morden (in township 1, range 5 west), where there is now an Icelandic colony consisting of some 150 souls.

#### X. THE PINE CREEK SETTLEMENT.

In 1899 the Icelanders began to settle in the southeast corner of Manitoba (in township 1, ranges 12 and 13 east), where there is now a colony of some 100 souls.

#### XI. THE SETTLEMENTS IN THE DAUPHIN DISTRICT.

In 1899 the Icelanders began to settle in the neighborhood of the Village of Winnipegosis (on Red Deer point on Lake Winnipegosis), and also in the Swan River Valley



(township 37, range 26 west). The Icelandic population in that district is about 200 souls.

In addition to the above, there are various small settlements, containing a few families each, in different parts of the province, at Poplar Park (township 16, range 6 east), and at various points along the Manitoba & Northwestern Railway, etc. There are also small Icelandic colonies in various other towns in Manitoba, as Brandon (about 100 souls), Portage la Prairie, Carberry, Baldur, Winnipegosis, etc., probably numbering some 250 souls altogether.

### RECAPITULATION.

#### ICELANDIC COMMUNITIES—POPULATION.

|                                    |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Gimli . . . . .                    | 2,500 |
| Winnipeg . . . . .                 | 4,000 |
| Selkirk . . . . .                  | 700   |
| Argyle . . . . .                   | 1,000 |
| Posen . . . . .                    | 500   |
| The Narrows of Lake Manitoba . . . | 150   |
| Big Point, Lake Manitoba . . . . . | 250   |
| Pipestone . . . . .                | 100   |
| Morden . . . . .                   | 150   |
| Pine Creek . . . . .               | 100   |
| Dauphin . . . . .                  | 200   |
| Small groups . . . . .             | 250   |
| Total . . . . .                    | 9,900 |